

## Civil War Book Review

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### A Most Perfect Man': What General Robert E. Lee Can Still Teach Us

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## Review

### A MOST PERFECT MAN'

#### What General Robert E. Lee can still teach us

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**Crocker III, H.W.** *Robert E. Lee on Leadership: Executive Lessons in Character, Courage, and Vision*. Prima, ISBN 761516808

To reconstruct the past, through discipline and discrimination, is satisfying to the historian, and possibly useful to those who read him. To make explicit its lessons, somehow to make them useful and instructive, and possibly influential, is more difficult, and perhaps more dangerous.

Harry Crocker's book is subtitled *Executive Lessons in Character, Courage, and Vision*. Early on, it states its purpose as "a book for businessmen -- the vocation that most Americans are called to perform -- seeking guidance on how to lead a business, employees, subordinates. But it is also a book for the whole man." In other words, **Lee on Leadership** aims to identify what it was in this "most perfect man" that made him successful as a leader. Can we learn and apply such lessons?

Matthew Arnold called Marcus Aurelius the most perfect man in history. In our own time, among men of affairs, we say that George Marshall was a perfect embodiment of devoted public service. But all such men, near-demigods to some, succeed less by what they do than by what they are; and history is embarrassed when it tries to communicate that "are" -- their character.

Nonetheless, Crocker identifies a number of qualities in Lee that would seem useful to all who would lead. His method is chronological: a series of chapters that follow Lee from adolescence to early old age, that cross familiar ground, but in new ways, and in ways that remind us that nobility of character, self-discipline, and forbearance, unaccompanied by a practiced ability to get things done, is not very useful in war.

Each chapter ends with the lessons enumerated, such as "A leader remembers that the goal of leadership is not self-fulfillment but service to his fellow men."

And the leader, if he emulates Lee (emulation plays but a small role in any scheme of education in the America of 1999), will lose himself in the work, will be "careless" of self and nobly humble, eschewing self-advertising.

This strange, hybrid book -- part historical, part biographical, and part handbook -- is beautiful in its concision and austerity. The author wears his philosophy and his knowledge of Lee, and of the theaters in which Lee worked, easily.

The tone is elegiac, as if Crocker understands, as most of us do, that it is impossible that such a man should appear again -- and that the qualities and techniques of leadership that infused his character can but serve as reminders and guides to the frailer clay that now presumes to lead -- to lead *anything* -- in our country.

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